

Beauty and the Battousai

by Ashfae

Category: Rurouni Kenshin

Genre: Romance

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2000-04-29 09:00:00

Updated: 2001-02-13 09:00:00

Packaged: 2016-04-27 17:09:08

Rating: K+

Chapters: 4

Words: 11,928

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: A crossover between RK and the original faery tale

1. Chapter One

Once upon a time in Japan there lived a man with three daughters. His wife had died many years ago, leaving him to raise his children alone; he did the best he could, and loved them, and they did him honor.

Their family was fairly well off. The father was a prosperous merchant who owned a fleet of ships that sailed between Japan and other foreign countries, trading rare goods. Nothing gave the man more happiness than to find something exotic from a far-off place and give it to his daughters; seeing their faces suffused with delight was all the riches he'd ever wanted.

As the years passed, his daughters grew from bright-eyed girls into lovely young women. The eldest daughter became engaged to a jitou of the city; the middle daughter was courted by a soldier. The youngest daughter ran circles around them all, teasing and laughing. And they were all content.

But times did not remain so blessed. In one blow, the merchant lost most of his ships and all of his money. The jitou broke off his engagement with the eldest daughter when news of the merchant's failure hit the city. The soldier had, several weeks previous, been sent to fight on the far side of the country; letters suddenly stopped coming, and the middle daughter heard no word of what might have become of him. She tried not to show how worried she was, but her skin was paler than it had ever been; all the light seemed to have gone out of her. The merchant took all these tidings hardest of all, and was stricken ill; he could not get out of his bed for several weeks.

It was the youngest daughter who took care of everything; she managed to sell their belongings for enough money to pay off her father's

debtors. Some of the debtors were kind, and willing to let the debts remain unpaid, for friendship's sake; these she thanked earnestly, and many of them felt that her smile of gratitude was worth the money they had lost. It was the youngest who took care of her father and older sisters; she cared for her father as best she could, and comforted her sisters as they grieved over their lost lovers. It was the youngest who, infuriated with the jitou's abandonment of his fiancée, sent him a scathing note stating exactly what she thought of his greed. She also sent letter after letter to the gunsou who had sent the middle daughter's soldier off to war, begging for news of him. No answer from the jitou or the gunsou ever came.

It was the youngest daughter who managed, somehow, to sell their house and belongings for enough money to get them all out of the city they had learned to hate. Years before, a relative had left them a house in a village far to the north; the father had never gotten around to selling it. The daughter decided that it would suit their purposes very well. As soon as their father was recovered enough to travel, they left.

The journey to the village was very hard, and took several weeks. Afterwards, none of them- not even the youngest- could remember it. All that remained was a haze of traveling and despair.

But by the time they arrived in the countryside that was to become their new home, they began to feel some stirrings of hope. The area was very beautiful, and the people seemed friendly; strangers waved from the side of the road as they passed by, and occasionally asked them to stop and sit down and share news of what was happening in the city.

But the merchant and his daughters did not wish to talk about the city, so they smiled and shook their heads. Still, they kept the memory of the kindness, and were comforted.

When they finally arrived at the village that would now be theirs, they were more comforted still. The people there remembered the old woman- the merchant's sister- who had lived there before, and welcomed her relatives warmly. The innkeeper showed them to their new house. As the two younger daughters stood looking at it, supporting their still-weak father between them, the eldest took the innkeeper aside and spoke to him for a moment. She returned with a smile on her face, and said that she had secured herself a job working as a waitress at the inn.

This news gave them all strength, for the only thing the youngest daughter had not been able to think of was how they would fend for themselves once they arrived. As the days passed, the eldest daughter spent all her time at the inn, waiting tables and learning to cook. The middle and youngest daughters ran about in a flurry of cleaning, and gradually the house became less dusty. The father was still ill enough that he spent most of his time in bed, but as time went he began to regain his health.

The income earned by the eldest daughter was not much, but it was enough. They learned to save money in all manner of ways, stretching their meager income as best they could. Before long the middle daughter- who had always been clever- convinced the village sanba to take her on as an apprentice. The youngest daughter stayed at home, keeping the house, watching over their father, and generally keeping

in charge of things. She tried to learn to cook, but had a tendency to burn things, which her sisters teased her about endlessly. Still, on the whole, things went well. Slowly- cautiously- they all learned once more to be happy.

After a year had passed and they had firmly settled down, a letter arrived for the father. It was from an old retainer of his in the city; one of his ships, thought to be destroyed in a storm, had returned laden with goods. If the father would be willing to return to the city for a time, the retainer would help him sell the goods.

And so the former merchant left his daughters for a time, traveling towards the city with a group of other men who wished to go there. The journey back was not as long as the first had been, but just as unmemorable. He parted company with his friends upon arrival, and walked on the streets of the city alone, with his own two feet. He remembered with irony how often he had ridden in a horse and carriage down the same paths. He did not miss those times as much as he thought he might.

The goods from the ship, and the ship itself, were sold quickly and easily. But all of the money went towards paying the debts that had been left behind when his family had quit the city, for the youngest daughter had not been able to manage everything. There was just enough money for a horse and the journey back.

The merchant left as soon as he could, despite the lateness of the season. Winter was approaching, and it was a dangerous time to be traveling. But all he could think of was his wasted trip, and his anxiousness to be back home with his daughters. And so, alone, he set off.

The storm hit when he was very near home; it came quick and fierce, the snow blocking his eyes and the wind blocking his ears until he no longer one direction from another. He gave up trying to guide his horse, and let the creature wander where she wished.

After some time, he noticed that his horse seemed to know where she was going, though he couldn't imagine how. No sooner has he realized this then they broke through the blizzard into a clearing. One minute snow was slipping across his face, the next...nothing. There was a clear section of grass, which the mare started munching on happily. The merchant could only look around himself in bewilderment.

On the grass before him stood a path, which led towards a city. Occasionally- so quickly that he could not be certain he saw them at all- lights would flicker in the windows of the buildings. But aside from those brief flashes, the city was dark. The sky above them was the color of twilight, though he would have been willing to swear that it was only midafternoon. He could make no sense of the situation- he had never heard of a city this large in this area. He had not even heard of any villages, only miles and miles of forest and mountains.

But the grass was real under his feet, and his skin was still chilled from the storm that raged on merrily a few feet behind him.

In wearied confusion, he left his horse- who was still contentedly eating the grass that the merchant's mind told him could not exist-

and walked along the path that led to the city. The only sound to be heard was that of his own shoes scuffling along the trail. There was no sound emanating from the city itself- no other people no movement, not even any birds. The silence added to the unrealness of the place.

Before long the merchant had reached a line of dark buildings; as he approached, a light lit up in one of them, and the door slid open- apparently of its own volition. Afraid but curious, he approached; through the half-open doorway he could see a table laid out with food. There was more than any ten men could be expected to eat, yet only one table setting.

Overwhelmed by hunger and exhaustion, the merchant forgot to be careful of propriety. He entered the room and sat down gladly, and began eating with a good heart. He never moved to put more food on his plate, yet his plate was never emptied.

Eventually he had his fill of eating, and his great weariness began to make itself felt. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a futon, covered in blankets. Part of his mind wondered at this, for he was certain it had not been there when he had entered the room.

But the rest of him was too tired to care, and slept soundly until morning.

He was profoundly disoriented when he awoke, and did not fully remember the events of the night before until he smelled something wonderful, and looked over to find the table where he had eaten dinner now covered with breakfast. As before, the amount of food on his plate never seemed to lessen, regardless of how much he ate.

By this point he was recovered enough to think past the wonder of what was happening to him, and to wish for a chance to thank his unseen benefactor. After he had finished his breakfast, he resolved to go looking for whoever it was that had done him so much kindness.

The sky was now the color of early morning, but the merchant could still find no traces of the sun. The buildings were as silent as they had been the night before, but no longer as oppressive. He walked through the streets, looking for any sign of life.

After an hour or so had passed- it was difficult to tell time in this unworldly place- he came to a garden. It was the largest he had ever seen, filled with more flowers than he could name. Paths meandered through it, lined with sakura and plum trees. He breathed in the scent of them until he was dizzy with sweetness, and more content than he could remember being in a long time.

He thought momentarily of his youngest daughter. She would so love this garden...her name meant "fragrant," and she had always loved flowers. He wished he could show it to her. He had not been able to find anything in the city to bring his daughters; it seemed cruel to him, especially cruel to not have anything for his youngest, who had worked so very hard to save them all. Perhaps he could take some to her; if he kept them under his coat and treated them gently, they might survive the trip home.

With that thought, he reached out and broke off a branch of white

plum blossoms.

There was no sound to warn him, no shadow to tell him of another's presence. But in the moment between when he broke the branch off the tree and when he took his next breath, a blade was pressed against his throat. He stood very still, head tilted back slightly, heart pounding in his chest as a voice whispered from behind him...

"Give me one reason not to kill you."

The merchant struggled hard to keep from stammering. "I-I meant no harm!"

The blade pressed a little more tightly against his throat.

"P-please! I only wanted it for my daughter. S-she is so kind, and...I thought surely, after all you have done for me, you would not begrudge the loss of a few flowers..."

"You are presumptuous." But the edge pulled away slightly, and the attacker seemed inclined to listen to his tale. So the merchant told-quickly, carefully- about his troubles in the city, how his family had moved far away, how his daughters had learned the strength to support their family. He dwelled especially the youngest and her kindness. The other man listened with a stillness that seemed inhuman.

The merchant finished: "It...it seemed so hard, not to be able to bring her something, in thanks. She loves flowers so much, and she has worked so hard..." His voice trailed off as he waited for his attacker to pronounce a sentence.

The other was silent for a long while. When he did speak, his voice was soft, without the air of menace that had accompanied it before. "I will spare your life if your daughter comes here."

The merchant's uneasiness had been draining away slightly, despite the sword at his neck; now it returned full-force, turned into panic. "Ah, no!" he cried. "You may think that I have no honor, but surely you cannot expect me to sacrifice my daughter's life for mine!"

"I said nothing of sacrifice," the other returned harshly. "I swear to you, if the girl comes here she will come to no harm. Not from me, or from anything in this city. I swear it by my own life. Do you doubt my word?"

"N-no!" the merchant stammered.

At that the blade left his throat entirely, and he was pushed forward. He stumbled for a second, catching his balance, then turned to look at his attacker. It took him several minutes to believe what he saw.

The other man was short, with long red hair tied back in a high ponytail to keep it out of his face. His hakama were white, but his gi was a shade of blue so dark that it was almost black. He looked ordinary enough, except for two things: first, he was much younger than the merchant would have expected, only a few years older than his youngest daughter.

Second, his cheek was marked with two scars, one going from his temple to his chin, the other staring near the eye and crossing the first. And, seeing that, the merchant knew who he was.

The Hitokiri Battousai!

But that was impossible! The Battousai was a myth, a monster created to scare children into obedience...and even if not, the war that he had supposedly fought in ended decades ago; far too long ago for this man, who was barely more than a boy, to still be so young.

And yet...after seeing the cross-scar, remembering the way he had appeared out of nowhere, the implacability in his voice...the merchant found it hard to doubt.

Even as his mind tried to make sense of these conclusions, the Battousai looked back at him. "Take your horse; go home. Tell your daughters what has happened here. If one of them will agree of her own free will to come back in your stead, then you will live. If not, then within a month's time you must return and face me. If you do not, then I will come and find you."

In his voice was everything cold and deadly, the certainty of any creature who has ever hunted and killed by night.

At that the merchant's panic overcame him, and he ran as quickly as he could in a direction that he hoped would bring him towards the gate. It did; his horse was still there, eyeing him curiously as he ran towards it. The mare shied away for a moment, then let him scramble onto her back.

They rode away as quickly as possible, the merchant checking over his shoulder every few minutes to make certain nothing was following.

Somehow- hours or days later- he arrived home. His daughters cries of welcome turned into concern as he all but fell off his horse, into their arms. Out of his hand fell a branch covered in white plum blossoms; the youngest daughter caught it, and later placed the petals in a bowl of water above their fireplace.

The father lay in bed for days as one delirious, no more than half-awake, moaning in his sleep.

After a week had passed he recovered, and drew his daughters close to hear the sad tale. The eldest and next-eldest daughters listened with expressions of growing horror; they had heard stories of the Hitokiri Battousai. Indeed, the middle daughter had made up a few stories about him herself when she was younger, to scare her young sister with. As the merchant reached the part where the Battousai had delivered his ultimatum- that one of them must go stay with him, or their father die- they covered their mouths in terror and grief.

The youngest listened with an increasingly somber expression, and made not a sound. When her father had finished his story and silence surrounded all of them, she said only, "Father, when the month's time is up, I will return with you."

They all argued with her. The sisters pleaded that no, none of them would go, it was a trick, a bluff, a dream...surely it was not necessary. The father pleaded that no, he would return alone, and let the punishment be his only.

But the youngest daughter's will was strong, and she would have none of it. Eventually they became convinced of her determination, and accepted her choice. After three more weeks had passed, she and her father set out on foot towards the great forest in which the city lay hidden.

They were lost within minutes of entering the woods, but the youngest daughter's step did not falter. Before long they had found the path that led towards the city.

Seeing it they both paused for a moment. Then the youngest daughter turned to her father and said only, "If you leave now, you'll be home in time for supper." When he hesitated, she smiled at him.

He looked as though he wanted to protest, or to reach out for her, or to do anything except what she was now asking of him. But instead he nodded, slowly, and turned. She watched as he walked away, until the trees blocked her sight of him entirely, and Kaoru was left alone.

* * *

> <p> ashfae@duct-tape.mit.edu<a>

2. Chapter

Two